

‘Extraordinary Man’ Unleashed:

Crime and Punishment* Reimagined in Bresson’s *Pickpocket

Though French filmmaker Robert Bresson does not formally acknowledge the debt his 1959 film *Pickpocket* owes to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, his fourth feature bears the unmistakable marks of the novel. From its solitary criminal who espouses a morality-trumping theory of human superiority to its redemptive female figure, echoes of Dostoevsky’s famous novel abound. At the same time, *Pickpocket* diverges from the novel in striking fashion: The film’s only death is a natural one, while its central crime is one that seems to lower the moral and spiritual stakes *Crime and Punishment* set so high.

Taking these similarities and differences together, one can read *Pickpocket* as a reflection of moments and ideas in *Crime and Punishment* through the lens of Bresson’s self-imposed filmmaking constraints. Indeed, many viewers and scholars have done so in the 60 years since the film’s debut. This reading, however, deprives *Pickpocket* of its richness as an extension of key elements of the novel. In reprising the novel’s pivotal “extraordinary man” theory, Bresson crafts a more disturbing trajectory, fashioning a 20th century Raskolnikov who longs to repeat and perfect his crime. Later, in reworking elements of the novel’s controversial epilogue, Bresson drains it of its spiritual transcendence, leaving uncertainty instead of the “new story” that awaited Dostoevsky’s tortured souls (518).

‘They don’t stop, believe me’

Fading from an austere title card, *Pickpocket* begins with a written confession from protagonist Michel, a taciturn loner whose first depicted theft takes place at a racetrack. Here, Bresson’s penchant for narrative economy is immediately apparent: By scarcely 10 minutes into

the 76-minute film, Michel faces questioning over the theft, walks without being charged, and defends an uncannily similar version of the hubristic “extraordinary man” theory at the center of the novel. Similar events span nearly half the length of *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky’s second-longest novel. *Pickpocket*’s “extraordinary man” scene still centers on the notion that a man with transformational ideas may, as Dostoevsky wrote, “grant himself permission to step over ... blood” (Dostoevsky 242), but it addresses one implication head-on in a way that *Crime and Punishment* does not: How does such a man know when to stop living above the law? Michel dismisses the question, insisting to the inspector, “It would only be at first, then they’d stop.” The Porfiry Petrovich-like inspector, unnamed in the film, replies tersely: “They don’t stop, believe me.” In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov is undone by the fact that he “couldn’t cope with [my step]” (Dostoevsky 512). Bresson creates a criminal who can.

As *Pickpocket* unfolds, Michel proves the inspector right, beginning an obsessive quest to perfect his craft. Through the lens of *Crime and Punishment*, this repetition can be seen as an alternate scenario in which Raskolnikov, reeling over his botched murder, simply tried again. And again. Other scholars have grappled with Bresson’s move to translate Raskolnikov’s single act of violence into a repeated crime, coming to different conclusions in the process. Hasty views Bresson’s decision as an integration of plot elements in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* follow-up, *The Gambler*, while Orr sees the crimes as a cumulative equivalency in which “the murder is replaced by a series of thefts” (Burry and White 69, 88). These interpretations reflect Bresson the reader, deeply enmeshed in Dostoevsky’s work, and Bresson the filmmaker, drawn relentlessly to gesture as symbol. By viewing Bresson’s crucial decision as the exercise of a tantalizing what-if, this interpretation can reflect Bresson the thinker, a man who described his

own films as “efforts toward something I’m trying to understand but that, whenever I think I’m getting close, recedes” (Bresson 220).

If Bresson presents *Crime and Punishment*’s extraordinary man theory to a degree that verges upon mimicry, his reworking of the novel’s central crime could not be more different. The bloodless, furtive act at the center of the film presents, at first, as the polar opposite of the double axe murder that triggers Raskolnikov’s suffering and anguish. The intricacies of Bresson’s visual language, however, suggest the thefts are not as impersonal as they appear. In the film’s early racetrack scene, Michel accidentally locks eyes with the woman as she turns her head and meets his gaze, inadvertently humanizing herself. Dostoevsky, too, placed Raskolnikov face to face with Alyona Ivanovna the day before, and moments before, her murder, allowing the money lender to gaze upon her killer “intently, with malice and mistrust” (71). This same language would suffice in describing Michel’s first depicted victim, whose glance nurtures a frisson of unease. In *Pickpocket*, this flash of intimacy will become a trademark moment in many of Michel’s subsequent thefts, suggesting his criminal impulse comes along with what Dostoevsky describes as a sudden “thirst for human company” (Dostoevsky 10).

What makes the central crime in *Pickpocket* resonate with that of the novel, despite their apparent differences, is the symbolic significance of theft in the larger world of the film. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov’s murders are among many depicted violations of another living being, from attempted sexual assault to suicide and animal cruelty. In *Pickpocket*, theft as a crime is devoid of context that could reframe and sublimate its severity. Save a child born out of wedlock, it is the only transgression ever depicted. In this cinematic world, the act of theft can then function as a symbol for the violation of a moral code, Michel its cipher of a transgressor. One could argue that this theft-as-sin symbolism is a happy accident borne of its place in

Bresson's early filmography. The three films he made in the 1950s, including *Pickpocket*, lack the violence depicted later in his career, when films such as *Une Femme Douce* and *L'Argent* explicitly engaged with suicide and murder (Pipolo 15). Yet Bresson was unequivocal that the lack of a violent crime in *Pickpocket* in no way lessened the heightened existential anguish he sought to dramatize. In a 1960 interview on French television show *Cinépanorama*, the director insisted he aimed to convey "the terrible solitude that is a thief's prison." Themes of isolation, suffering, and spiritual anguish already were emerging in this early era of Bresson's work as his "accursed questions." Their resonance with Russian literature offers clear rationale for his near-worship of Dostoevsky, an author he called "the greatest" (Bresson 228).

The isolation that surrounds Michel notably lacks the self-repulsion Raskolnikov exhibits after the murders. Instead, Michel's headlong plunge into the world of pickpocketing begins to glitter with the allure of Hitchcockian suspense. His first theft seems to succeed by pure luck, the victim's purse snapping open with a clumsy thud. At the film's midpoint, however, Bresson stages a bravura sequence in which Michel joins a cadre of other thieves to execute a coordinated series of thefts in Paris' Gare de Lyon. This feat of editing and choreography imbues pickpocketing with a balletic grace, ironizing Michel's descent into dangerous obsession by depicting it with skillful cinematic verve. In the feverish repetition of the thefts is suggested a depravity even Raskolnikov never attained—and an evocation of one of the novel's most famous moments. These extraordinary men, multiplied and looting the people of Paris, manifest as a representation of Raskolnikov's final dream, a pestilence of madness run wild as each man is convinced "he and he alone possessed the truth" (Dostoevsky 514).

'What a strange path I had to take'

Michel's journey ultimately leads to a moment of striking dissonance with *Crime and Punishment*. Bresson chooses not to reprise Raskolnikov's climactic police station confession, stripping Michel of this moment of humility and self-inflicted suffering. Instead, he is caught in the act upon a return to the racetrack and imprisoned, suggesting he never would have stopped had his luck continued. Before this crucial narrative departure, however, Michel confesses his crimes to Jeanne, a composite of Dunya, Raskolnikov's sister, and Sonya, the novel's "holy fool" and spiritual compass. Like Dostoevsky, Bresson repeatedly uses his chief female character as a conscience for Michel, but he also undermines her transformative, redemptive potential. "Love had resurrected [Raskolnikov and Sonya]" (Dostoevsky 517) in *Crime and Punishment*, but the love that may unite Michel and Jeanne keeps them earthbound. Near the end of the film, Jeanne has borne the child of Jacques, a Razumikhin stand-in, but does not want to yoke him to a marriage of love by obligation. Bresson suggests, but does not outright establish, that her true love may be for Michel, but the closest Jeanne ever arrives to a declaration of love comes when Michel asks her why she bothers to visit him in prison. "You're all I have," Jeanne replies, hinting that loneliness may be as much a factor as any feelings of true love.

Jeanne's words hover like a fog over her climactic reunion with Michel in the final scene, his narrated confession remarking on the "strange path I had to take" to reach her. In his novel's conclusion, Dostoevsky leaves ambiguous whether Raskolnikov ever undergoes a religious conversion but declares that "a new story begins" (518) for his two main characters. Bresson's own take on this famous ending is strikingly muted, suggesting something short of spiritual hope and conflicting visually with the director's own reading of the ending as a depiction of "redemption from sin" (78). The eyes of Michel, drained of the theatrical emotion Bresson worked obsessively to purge from his so-called models, peer through the prison bars. Looking

past Jeanne, his gaze lingers with a haunted uncertainty, the word Bresson originally planned to use for the film's title (Quandt 13).

Alike in their narrative mechanics, the post-confession epilogue in *Crime and Punishment* and the ending of *Pickpocket* also have prompted a similarly conflicted critical discourse. Echoing other scholars, Frazier called *Crime and Punishment*'s final section an "abrupt and artificial narrowing of narrative possibilities" (Frazier 150). *Pickpocket*'s final moments, seen as transcendent by some, also have faced charges of being unconvincing and abrupt (Pipolo 109). The accuracy of this assessment and the possibility that this was a deliberate choice may not be mutually exclusive, especially in light of Bresson's relationship to spirituality. Many of his films wrestle in some way with the plight and destiny of man's soul, yet interpretations of these elements tend to see expressions of belief without heavy shades of doubt. Filmmaker Louis Malle's ecstatic praise of *Pickpocket* sketches an extended allegory in which "the thief is *man* ... in the hands of God" (Quandt 731), an interpretation the director politely disregarded. Bresson's 1966 film *Au Hasard Balthazar* practically invites a reading as an allegory of Christ-like suffering: In the film's final moments, an ailing donkey saddled with the sins of man takes its final breaths in a pasture, surrounded by sheep and dogs. This has become an iconic image in Bresson's filmography, perhaps *the* iconic image, yet it is an incomplete thought. Bresson allows the camera to linger as the other animals disappear, leaving Balthazar alone once again.

As consistent as Bresson was about his philosophies on acting and filmmaking, his inconsistent characterization of his own beliefs suggests he adhered to doubt and uncertainty over a strict theology. In a famously prickly exchange with writer-director Paul Schrader, he endorsed the concept of predestination, supporting his unconfirmed association with the

Jansenist offshoot of Catholicism. Later in the same interview, he mused that “I think I am in the middle, between faith and believing” (Quandt 699). Dostoevsky, by contrast, emerged from his years of imprisonment newly inspired by the “the moral message of love and self-sacrifice that Christ had brought to the world,” documenting these convictions in spiritually revealing personal writings shortly before beginning *Crime and Punishment* (Frank 408). The novel mentions God more than 100 times in various contexts; in *Pickpocket*, it is spoken once. Dostoevsky’s adherence to Orthodox Christianity fully manifests in *Crime and Punishment*, even as Raskolnikov wrestles before the mystery of grace, yet Bresson’s work “bears the signs of one raised Catholic as well as the doubts of a deeply engaged modern thinker” (Pipolo 15).

Echoes across a century

Taken together, *Pickpocket* and *Crime and Punishment* are rife with connections that range from tenuous to contradictory to strikingly symbiotic. As such, the works’ rich intertextuality and Bresson’s professed adoration for Dostoevsky only render more puzzling the distance the director sought to create between the novel and his film. Asked bluntly on a French radio show weeks after the film’s debut whether he had thought of *Crime and Punishment*, Bresson retorted that he had “certainly thought about it, because one can’t not think about Dostoevsky,” later conceding that “the end [of my film] is clearly the same” (Bresson 77-78). *Pickpocket* nonetheless is credited as an original screenplay, the first of Bresson’s career.

The best explanation for Bresson’s take on *Pickpocket*’s literary origins may be found not in his words on this film but on others. The director formally adapted two Dostoevsky stories late in his career: *A Gentle Creature* debuted in 1969, while *Four Nights of a Dreamer*, his retelling of “White Nights,” hit screens in 1972. Speaking to French newspaper *Le Monde* before the release of *Dreamer*, Bresson said he was drawn to these two stories not for their greatness but for

their lack thereof: Both stories are “pretty flawed,” Bresson said, “which allows me to feel justified in using them, rather than serving them” (218). These remarks reveal the dual role literary greatness played for an artist like Bresson: On one hand, it was hallowed ground. On the other, it was a kind of creative prison. For this reason, Bresson added, he “wouldn’t touch [Dostoevsky’s] great novels, with their formal perfection” (217). This logic shines a new light on Bresson’s disavowal of *Pickpocket* as an adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*. His film was not an act of “picking Dostoevsky’s pocket,” as one scholar cleverly titled an essay on the film. Instead, it was a gesture of respect. With *Pickpocket*, Bresson came as close as he possibly could to recreating a masterpiece central to his life without tarnishing his admiration for its legendary author.

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